DAVID BATES

Crisis Between the Wars:
Derrida and the Origins
of Undecidability

A completely unfree society (i.e., one proceeding in everything by strict rules of "conformity") will, in its behavior, be either inconsistent or incomplete, i.e., unable to solve certain problems, perhaps of vital importance. Both, of course, may jeopardize its survival in a difficult situation. A similar remark would also apply to individual human beings.

—Kurt Gödel, draft letter[1]

THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY deconstruction has so far resisted historicization.[2] But perhaps the crucial factor has been the continuing *presence* of its main practitioner, Jacques Derrida, who refused, one might say, to become part of history. Right up to his death in October of 2004, Derrida wrote about some of the key issues facing the world today.[3] So while deconstruction as a "theory" has largely faded from the academic scene in the last decade, even in North America, where it had its greatest impact, notably in literary and cultural studies, Derrida himself seemed to have escaped obsolescence. This has, it seems to me, been mostly due to his decision (some would say belated decision) to engage directly the kind of political, legal, and ethical questions that had for the most part been rather marginal to deconstruction in its early incarnation. Derrida's own turn to the political can be traced to his dramatic, audacious, and highly influential talk "Force of Law: the 'Mystical Foundations of Authority' " given in 1989 at the Cardozo Law School. Derrida would soon publish other significant texts that dwelled on critical political issues, most prominently his books *Spectres of Marx* (1993) and *Politics of Friendship* (1994). However controversial his ideas may have been, Derrida's politicized version of deconstruction allowed him (and deconstruction) to stay relevant in an intel-

ABSTRACT Jacques Derrida's turn to the political took deconstruction in a new direction this past decade. Central to this later political writing was the concept of undecidability. This essay traces the use of undecidability in Derrida's work, from its early appearance in textual theory to its redeployment in his political philosophy, before tracing out the origins of this idea in interwar thought. The argument is that this idea was already highly politicized in interwar discourse. Mathematical and logical concepts of undecidability were linked to other approaches to crisis and decision in the period. Unearthing this context shows that any evaluation of deconstruction's impact will require a thorough historicization of twentieth-century thought, something that has been hindered by Derrida's own lack of engagement with these broader intellectual currents. /

lectual culture that was for the most part turning away from "postmodern" problems of textual or discursive meaning and identity construction and toward pressing political and legal issues such as globalization, human rights, and ethnic violence. But did deconstruction really contribute much to our understanding of law and politics? This, I would suggest, is a question that cannot be asked—let alone answered—without some historicization of deconstruction and its role in twentieth-century intellectual life.

As many commentators have noted, Derrida's political turn was no doubt motivated by the escalating attacks on deconstruction by those who saw its emphasis on indeterminacy, instability, and polysemy as a threat to moral and political commitment.[4] Some criticized deconstruction for the implication that there were no foundational principles; at best, deconstruction would lead to a kind of amoral and apolitical stance. But attacks on deconstruction only intensified with the two "affairs" of the 1980s: first the controversy over Martin Heidegger's Nazism and then, more personally for Derrida, the Paul de Man affair. In a way, these two episodes marked attempts by some detractors to *historicize* deconstruction, by linking its highly complex and abstract reflections on metaphysics, language, and philosophical truth with a very concrete political position—namely, fascism. In other words, deconstruction was understood to be the perfect underpinning for a political ideology that derided truth, justice, and freedom. Of course, this kind of attack was only one example of a general cultural reaction to postmodernism in this period, a reaction defined by a resistance to the dissolution of any claims to truth—especially in the political sphere—with the specter of the Holocaust in particular haunting many of these discussions.[5]

In his infamous "Force of Law" talk at Cardozo, published eventually alongside another talk delivered at UCLA the following year, Derrida confronted these attacks head on. If his apologia of Heidegger and, especially, de Man were never really taken seriously by critics (or even by many sympathetic to deconstruction), Derrida's sustained and complex engagement with these questions helped to reorient the relationship between deconstruction and the political. Putting the idea of "undecidability" at the very center of his analysis, Derrida rather brazenly argued that one of the concepts most often associated with the amoral and apolitical tendencies of deconstruction was in fact at the heart of "justice" itself. Redeploying a term earlier used mainly to describe the structural indeterminacy of textual aporia, Derrida now explained how undecidability was crucial for any understanding of political action and for understanding the very possibility of justice in our world. Moreover, Derrida did not at all evade the "concrete" historical implications of his argument. His analysis was centered on a reading of a single text by Walter Benjamin, a figure whose posthumously constructed image as perhaps the quintessential intellectual victim of Nazism and the Final Solution helped gain his work a wide readership in the academy. And Derrida went even further here, adding to the mix a serious discussion of the infamous Nazi collaborator Carl Schmitt, highlighting in particu-

lar the *relationship* between these two thinkers, a move that to this day continues to infuriate some commentators.[6]

My argument here is that Derrida's turn to these important interwar figures for his elaboration of the "politicality" of undecidability was by no means accidental and that a rethinking of the interwar context will be necessary before any evaluation of Derrida's political work is even possible. For at its origin, in the technical domain of mathematical logic, undecidability was *already* a politicized concept, in that it formed part of a wider interwar discourse on the nature of unprecedented decisions in situations characterized by crisis and the failure of all kinds of norms and formal systems defining order and organization. In effect, Derrida's own turn to the political late in his career was only made possible by his refusal to interrogate the historical dimensions of undecidability when he first adopted it in some of his earliest publications. If we are going to evaluate not only Derrida's political thinking but also his earlier more influential work on problems in philosophy and literary theory, we will need to begin with a broad contextualization of the questions he was addressing. An investigation of the historical dimensions of undecidability will make it apparent that Derrida's arguments must be considered part of a larger movement of thought, and that therefore any effort to understand the genuine impact of deconstruction in the twentieth century will need to take a historical perspective. For the problems addressed in Derrida's work had their own history, even though their precise trajectories have been obscured by the antihistorical bent of much late-twentieth-century theory. And my suggestion is that some of Derrida's efforts—particularly in his political work—were seriously weakened by his refusal to participate in these larger streams of thought.

My goal here is to provide one preliminary historical perspective on deconstruction, to begin to think, that is, about deconstruction as history. The resources for this task are not yet extensive. To be sure, we cannot be satisfied with the rather mythological histories or fantastic philosophical genealogies usually employed to explain deconstruction's historical role as a kind of triumph over philosophy itself. At the same time, historicizing deconstruction does not have to mean reducing its complexity by relating it, or even assimilating it, to its most immediate historical contexts (postwar Paris, structuralism, French educational institutions, or more specifically, Algeria and Judaism in the case of Derrida). Nor does it mean interpreting or decoding deconstruction as some form of postmodern "ideology" particularly suited to, say, the condition of late capitalism, as Frederic Jameson argued long ago.[7] But as we start to think seriously about deconstruction as history, it is equally important that we do not simply reenact all of the previous battles over its meaning and significance—a repetition that has erupted again as the struggle over Derrida's legacy has officially begun.[8] Deconstruction was part of the twentieth century and thus any proper evaluation must see it as part of that history. Our task, then, is to begin to trace connections in order to see how deconstruction fit in the postwar intellectual world, what role it actually played in shaping the contours of our own

period. This historicization should be conceived as broadly as possible if we want to escape the rather unproductive tendency either to celebrate or denigrate his thinking.

With this in mind, I will begin by untangling some of the complexities of undecidability as they figure in Derrida's work and in the trajectory of his career. I will follow some of the concepts associated with undecidability as a way of raising questions about Derrida's work and its relationship to wider currents of twentieth-century thought. Evaluating Derrida requires historicization, because we have to know what happened before we can see what real influence deconstruction did—or did not—have.[9] Derrida's belated turn to the political is the clue that deconstruction had to recuperate its own historical role in some fashion, so that is where I will start.

Deconstruction and the Politics of Undecidability

Though the term "undecidability" was never as prominent as more famous ones such as *différance, jeu, grammatologie,* or even "deconstruction" itself, it has figured in deconstructive practice from the very start, often playing a critical role. For Derrida, undecidability was never a synonym for mere indeterminacy, or some loose free play of meaning. Rather, undecidability was a way of explaining a very specific structural condition at the heart of language. Undecidability was what preceded and therefore made possible the production of any of the determinate meanings that then had to be "decided" for meaning to unfold in any particular reading. Deconstruction was, of course, the practice that demonstrated, over and over again, the fact that these decisions could be made otherwise—and that there was no way one particular meaning could be given some privileged status. Deconstruction did not do away with meaning, but instead revealed the structure of undecidability that made possible the generation of very particular, often opposing meanings. This structure, Derrida would explain in his book *Dissemination*, was located in that "knot" that linked the formal dimensions of syntax and the pragmatical structure of the semantic. The multiplicity of meaning, then, emerged not from some infinite lexical richness, as he put it, but from the formal praxis of undecidability, which operated in the aporetic intersection that marks a text's "weave" of intention and structure.[10]

In a similar fashion, Paul de Man explained the constitutive instability of textual meaning as the consequence of a radical undecidability (although as far as I can tell he rarely used the term explicitly).[11] Most clearly in his influential *Allegories of Reading,* de Man showed how this undecidability was the product of a radical suspension between formal grammar and "meaning." He named this radical suspension "rhetoric." His point was that the meaning of any given text was undecid-

able because there was nothing "outside" of the text that could tell us which of the possible meanings was the "right" one. De Man's attention to irony and the rhetorical question was a way of highlighting the fact that even though very specific meanings emerged from language, the unresolvable tension between structure and intention meant that texts were fundamentally chiasmatic—oscillating, so to speak, between two poles, awaiting a decision that could only be imposed by a (nondeconstructive) reader. As de Man put it in the introduction to *Allegories of Reading*,

The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails.

Indeed, for de Man the two meanings helped *constitute* one another—making a "valid decision" impossible since neither meaning can "exist in the other's absence."[12]

While in his early work undecidability remained strictly confined to the ways of understanding the aporetic nature of textual systems of meaning in general, Derrida began, just before "Force of Law," to think about the political and ethical implications of the term. We can speculate that because so much criticism—not to mention celebration—of deconstruction hinged on the (incorrect) assumption that it was concerned with the "free play" of meaning, perhaps Derrida wanted at this point to show how *serious* deconstructive practice was in relation to this issue. At any rate, this reconsideration of undecidability can be traced in an interview printed as an afterword to *Limited Inc.: ABC . . .* , his playful and intricate response to John Searle's negative critique of Derrida's theory of language in general, and his interpretation of J. L. Austin's work on speech acts in particular. In the interview, Derrida carefully rejected all of the superficial readings of his work, deemphasizing the "liberating" implications of deconstruction while highlighting the inherent gravity of his use of terms such as undecidability. "I want to recall," he said first, "that undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly *determined* in strictly *defined* situations (for example, discursive . . . but also political, ethical, etc.)."[13]

Derrida then noted that undecidability can be read three ways—as dialectical, "that which resists binarity or even triplicity"; as what "defines, still within the order of the calculable, the limits of decidability, or calculability or of formalizable completeness"; and last, as what remains "heterogeneous" to both of these other meanings. This last category is absolutely crucial for understanding Derrida's later work on the political. For, as he went on to claim here,

in accordance with what is only ostensibly a paradox, *this particular* undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability. It calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space

that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this *experience and experiment of the undecidable* (116).

Here is where Derrida first turned the charge of apoliticality back on his critics. He argues in effect that genuine decision—free, responsible decision—can only occur in this condition of radical *un*decidability, a condition revealed most clearly (not uncoincidentally) in deconstructive readings themselves. In other words, without the condition of undecidability, human decisions would be nothing but "programmed," predetermined already by some rule or principle; they would be no decisions at all.

This is what allowed Derrida to argue *not* that deconstruction could be "applied" to political, legal, or ethical domains (something that the many adherents of deconstruction had already done, though without great effect) but instead to argue that deconstruction itself was *always already* about the political, the legal, the ethical, that these problems were already *central* to his thinking, despite his obvious lack of engagement with political issues per se in his work.[14] So for Derrida the deconstruction of political or legal "discourse" (along the lines of critical legal studies, for example) was not really the issue. Derrida would be arguing, in effect, that deconstructive practice was a necessary prelude to any genuine political action. The defiant conclusion of Derrida's essay—that "deconstruction is justice"—flowed directly from his claims about undecidability, claims that were drawn from his earlier work.[15] As he noted explicitly in "Force of Law": "It was normal, foreseeable, desirable that studies of deconstructive style should culminate in the problematic of law" (929).

Derrida elaborated this position in great detail in "Force of Law," arguing that if decisions consisted in merely applying rules, then we might well say that they were "legal" but they would not really be *just*, however exalted these rules or principles might be—because, as Derrida noted, there must be some kind of *active* judgment (something that escapes any regulation) for justice to enter into the decision (961). Every true decision had to endure what Derrida again calls the "ordeal" of the undecidable—the undecidable being all that is "foreign" and heterogeneous to calculation and determination. The undecidable was not, he said forcefully, some kind of hesitation, an oscillation between two contradictory significations, or rules, or decisions. It needed to be understood as that experience of "giving oneself up" to the idea of the "impossible" decision. Derrida meant by this a decision unfettered by any determination, any rule, any reason. According to him, this moment of undecidability was what made possible any "real" determinate decision in the world, for any decision was (as the etymology implies) a *cut*, an intervention into the world. For that reason, a decision is always a moment of "madness" because it recognizes its own lack of necessity, as it always comes "after" this condition of

undecidability, as Derrida, drawing on the ideas of Søren Kierkegaard, would note (967).

The problem, however, was that in suspending the decision in the moment of undecidability, which freed up the very space for an actual decision that would be made on some specific question, it turned out that, as Derrida explained it, the content of any concrete decision would always in the end be the product of some rational process, some application of rule or principle—the decision would be made *for some reason*. Decisions are determined, that is, by some prior content of some kind (964–65). All decisions were necessarily "unjust," Derrida claimed, because of this condition. "There is apparently no moment in which a decision can be presently and fully just" because it either has not yet been made, or it has been made, which means it has been made according to some prior rule.

It is here that Derrida introduces the critical importance of deconstructive practice for the preservation of justice itself. For, as he claimed, decisions are always haunted by the spectral presence of the "undecidable"; the cut, by virtue of being a cut in time and space, leaves its trace, a wound of a sort. The decision, whatever concrete determination it might have, as a *decision* marks an outside that can never be fully present and thus known. "Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision" (965). However, for Derrida, this impasse is of course where we might find justice—that is, not in the content of some rational or legal decision but in the madness that preceded it and in fact made it possible as a "cut" in our experience. So deconstruction is justice, Derrida suggests, because deconstruction alone is what can *reveal* the ghost of the undecidable in any specific decision; it is what reveals the *necessity* of that undecidability for any genuine decision. This undecidability becomes our reminder of the promise of that "impossible decision," a decision that would be free of all "reason," manifesting only a justice of absolute purity, unlike our real decisions, which are inevitably made with an "urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge" (965).

It is at this point in the text (the transition to part two, which is based on a talk first delivered at UCLA in a colloquium on Nazism and the Final Solution) that Derrida moved to discuss two figures, Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt, to explore further the ramifications of this relationship between decision, undecidability, and justice. In his reading of Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence," conducted with reference to Schmitt's concepts of sovereignty and decision, Derrida suggests that the tension between "foundational violence" (*die rechtsetzende Gewalt*) and "law preserving violence" (*die rechtserhaltende Gewalt*; these are Benjamin's terms) mirrors the primordial tension between justice and legality—and reveals the impossibility of their ultimate coincidence in our world. Law is inherently violent, because it has to preserve itself, but this law can justify itself only by its own specific origin. Since this origin is outside of legality by definition, it must be understood as the product of a pure foundation, one that intervenes into the world with its own "lawless"

violence. Justice without law is, for Derrida, therefore an impossibility. Genuine justice is, in the end, figured in Benjamin's text as "divine violence," something that annihilates all boundaries, destroys all law, and is never haunted by the undecidability that plagues all forms of founding and preserving violence. As Derrida drily noted, this was all too "messianico-marxist or archeo-eschatological" for his taste (1045). He would go on, in texts such as *Politics of Friendship*, to elaborate on the crucial importance of seeing "democracy," for example, as something eternally deferred, always "to come" but never arriving.[16]

Now, much of the considerable debate generated by Derrida's claims here and in the later political texts has centered on the status of the arguments themselves, largely outside any historical context. Whether we believe that Derrida "purveys a naive celebration of extra-legal adjudication" that raises the "specter of judgmental arbitrariness"[17] or want to argue that Derrida reveals how "the instability of the event of institution not only leads to politicization, but also to a constitutive crisis of legitimation at the very heart of the political,"[18] to take two examples at hand, the question seems to be how to assess Derrida's analysis of political undecidability. Was he right or was he wrong? Is law at its heart undecidable and justice only a divine impossibility, or can we still make normative claims with some degree of confidence? Rarely does the fact that Derrida resurrects two interwar German figures enter into the discussion in any serious way.[19]

I would like to engage this problem by looking sideways at Derrida's text, focusing on the crucial concept of undecidability and its relationship to earlier forms of thought—his own, and others. Where did Derrida get this term? Why did he *redeploy* it in his discussions of law and politics, and why did he choose these interwar figures to explore these ideas? Taking this route, it becomes clear that Derrida's choices were not altogether accidental. The interwar period reveals many attempts to understand the concepts and difficulties traced in his own late political work. But more important, we can see how the origins of both "classic" deconstruction and its later political transformations need to be examined together. An engagement with undecidability in its dual context can provide us with a critical perspective on deconstruction's place in the twentieth century.

It will become clear, I hope, that Derrida's political intervention—despite its sophistication and genuine insight—is not as original or interesting as so many followers of deconstruction assume. Furthermore, as we trace the political signficance of undecidability in earlier contexts, it seems that we will be forced to reevaluate the significance of Derrida's earliest ideas in this area. While there is no question that deconstructive undecidability had an enormous impact in certain academic disciplines, as it rapidly took hold in, for example, American literary and rhetorical theory, its influence in philosophy was noticeably weak. Derrida's extraordinary importance for the development of certain intellectual positions and institutions in the American academy deserves its own historical analysis. But at this point, it is enough to say that many academics who herald Derrida's momentous philosophical

significance were never trained in the disciplines he is supposed to have affected. Indeed, the practice of "Continental Philosophy" outside of the Continent is sometimes the domain of literature and cultural studies departments, which helps explain in part the enthusiasm that greeted Derrida's turn to the political. However, it is possible that this turn was less a move forward than a return to a rich historical moment, one that had been obscured by his very own analyses. At least that is what I will try to show.

The Logic of Undecidability: Mathematics and the Crisis of Reason Between the Wars

In a narrow sense, historicizing the idea of undecidability is not that difficult, since its origins are very specific and easy to locate. The modern sense of the word emerged only in the early twentieth century, between the wars, as a technical concept in mathematical logic. Mathematicians such as Alan Turing, Alonso Church, and in particular Kurt Gödel, explored mathematical propositions whose truth or falsity could not be decided by any finite logical procedure, even though these propositions were meaningful (that is, not nonsensical), constructed according to the rules governing a particular formal system.[20] In fact, Gödel famously showed in 1931 that *every* formal system that was complicated enough to include basic arithmetic would *always* contain undecidable propositions. Moreover, every such formal system was necessarily "incomplete" according to Gödel, because its own consistency could never be demonstrated within the system.[21] It is easy to see how appealing this idea would be for Derrida as he began to develop his deconstructive approach to philosophical texts. And in fact Derrida did explicitly borrow the term from Gödel in a number of earlier works.

At first glance, however, it seems that Derrida's actual knowledge of Gödel's work was rather hazy.[22] When he invoked (admittedly "by analogy") the idea of undecidability in *Dissemination*, for example, during a discussion of the problem of imitation and allusion in Stéphane Mallarmé, Derrida explained that

an undecidable proposition, as Gödel demonstrated in 1931, is a proposition which, given a system of axioms governing a multiplicity, is neither an analytic nor deductive consequence of those axioms, nor in contradiction with them, neither true nor false with respect to those axioms. *Tertium datur*, without synthesis.[23]

This is a bit garbled. It is difficult, for example, to know what is meant here by "governing a multiplicity" or why Derrida thinks that the logical principle of the excluded middle (*tertium non datur*—that [p, or not p] is always true) is somehow denied by Gödel's result. But the confusion is explained by the fact that Derrida is not actually referring to Gödel here but is instead misquoting himself paraphrasing Edmund Husserl in the 1962 translation and introduction to the *Origin of Geometry*.

There, Derrida was discussing *Husserl*'s earliest axiomatic projects, which were, like all others in the early twentieth century, "threatened" (this is Derrida's word) by Gödel's results. As Derrida wrote, Husserl made the assumption, in *Logical Investigations* for example, that "starting from a system of axioms which 'govern' a multiplicity, every proposition is determinable *either* as analytic consequence *or* as analytic contradiction." Derrida added: "Such confidence did not have long to wait before being contradicted; indeed its vulnerability has been well shown, particularly when Gödel discovered the rich possibility of '*undecidable*' propositions." Derrida went on, however, to demonstrate that Husserl's subsequent attempt to probe the primordial origins of "deductivity" in the late text *The Origin of Geometry*, was not at all affected by Gödel's theorems. As Derrida wrote, "the unity of geometrical truth's primordial sense, that unity which orients the *Origin*, could then be posed in a question of this kind: what is mathematical determinability in general, if the undecidability of a proposition, for example, is still a mathematical determination?"[24] In other words, Husserl at some point abandoned the attempt to reduce logic to deductivity, expanding his inquiry to search for the very origins of the time and space phenomena that grounded the apprehension of unities, which would be the constitutive origin of any mathematical or geometrical insight. Derrida's early "deconstruction" of Husserl (the word was of course not yet used to describe this particular analysis) hinged on a deep probing of the relationship between historicity and ideality, the tension, that is, between the idea of some radical "origin" and the sense of ideas as emerging from a specific historical determination. For Derrida, this tension was figured in Husserl's text as the paradoxical predicament of trying to trace the historicity of "geometry" as a determined reality *without* knowing in advance the "idea" of geometry that would make possible the identification of such experiences.

At any rate, Derrida never explicitly refers to Gödel's own 1931 paper in this book on Husserl. My suspicion is that he simply borrowed much of his analysis from Jean Cavaillès, the influential philosopher of science (and resistance fighter) who died in 1943 at the hands of the Germans.[25] His own book on logic and science (published posthumously by Georges Canguilhem and Charles Ehresmann) includes a detailed examination of Husserl's complex mathematical thinking, with references to Gödel in this context.[26] (Cavaillès had in fact met Husserl before the war). More important than the exact source of Derrida's knowledge of undecidability, however, is a larger question. As we know, Derrida was developing a preliminary form of deconstruction in his analysis of the concept of origin in Husserl's text. Again, as we all know, Derrida would deploy this deconstructive technique to put into question a wide range of philosophical positions in his vastly influential series of texts published in the late 1960s. Derrida was offering a relentless critique of the "logic of identity" and "logocentrism" that infected the whole "western philosophical tradition." Clearly, it was the larger critique animating his early work that helps

to explain its enthusiastic reception—especially outside of the discipline of academic philosophy—and not the *particular* textual critiques of specific authors such as Husserl.

Yet it is surprising, and I think unfortunate, that Derrida, in this work on Husserl that paved the way for his more dramatic claims a few years later, showed little or no interest in the wider historical significance of the problems Husserl, and Gödel, were addressing. Writing at the end of his life in a moment marked by what he called the "crisis of the European sciences," Husserl was of course trying to rethink the nature of human rationality, something he thought was threatened by the dangerous and radical technicization of reason that had progressed since the Enlightenment.[27] For Derrida, it seems clear in retrospect, this was mostly a purely textual problem—he was interested, that is, mainly in how Husserl's critique of both positivist historicism (the return to "facts") and technicist objectivism (the instrumental formalization of reason) gets Husserl into what Derrida called "certain difficulties" (27), difficulties that would be elaborated in great detail in this "introduction" that is considerably longer than the text it introduces. This method—the investigation of these difficulties—was a preliminary form of deconstruction, the method later positioned as the culmination, or perhaps the very "end," of a philosophical tradition that was inextricably tied to certain logical and metaphysical presuppositions in Western thought. This is still the way deconstruction is often understood in the "Continental" version of the history of philosophy.

But it is important to point out that Derrida ignored (or at least it is difficult to find any trace of this in his early writing) the fact that for decades mathematicians, logicians, and philosophers had been spending considerable effort exploring the foundations of logic and mathematics, probing the grounds of scientific thinking, and, increasingly in the interwar period, trying to redefine the very nature of reason itself in the wake of this critical dismantling. Indeed, alongside the existential and phenomenological reception of Husserl and Heidegger in France there was an equally important strand of thought that also began with Husserl but emphasized the problems of logic, formalism, and what is called "epistemology" in French academia—that is, roughly, the philosophy of science. This is something Michel Foucault had noted in his discussion of Canguilhem's sometimes neglected work in the history and theory of concepts.[28] Derrida was hardly isolated from this kind of work. He taught general philosophy and logic at the Sorbonne in the early 1960s, as an assistant to professors working in this tradition, such as Gaston Bachelard and Canguilhem himself.[29] His early philosophy clearly moved between these two traditions, at least with respect to the ideas he was deconstructing.

However, Derrida never seemed to acknowledge that there were a number of European thinkers who were, before the war, asserting that even the "logic of identity" was not at all an a priori foundation for inquiry. In differing ways, reasoning and logic were beginning to be understood as concrete forms of human experience

and thinking that always escaped any formal representation. This was particularly evident in interwar debates concerning mathematical reasoning and the foundations of mathematics. Given some of the problems associated with, for example, Bertrand Russell and A. N. Whitehead's monumental attempt in *Principia Mathematica* to ground all mathematics in logic, some mathematicians picked up on ideas first put forward by figures such as Henri Poincaré and Emile Borel, who had argued that formal symbolic languages did not exhaust mathematical thought. There was something in mathematical demonstration that would always escape explicit "demonstration" itself. Poincaré, for instance, pointed to the use of induction in proofs as just one clear example of a mathematical principle that was itself "outside" of mathematical demonstration.[30]

These ideas would be developed by the so-called "intuitionist" school of mathematics, which formed around the Dutch idealist mathematician L. E. J. Brouwer, whose important work in topology, set theory, and other fields was complemented by theoretical interests in the foundations of mathematics.[31] Brouwer's work was championed (and defended) by Hermann Weyl in disputes that became increasingly bitter during the interwar era.[32] The intuitionists claimed that there were no abstract logical principles with some kind of foundational status—for example, in his 1907 dissertation, Brouwer famously denied the logical principle of the excluded middle, and thereby set aside much of classical mathematics, in which proofs often relied on the fact that if one proved that a proposition's negation was false, one had therefore proven the truth of the proposition. This was just one example of Brouwer's (admittedly mystical) effort to grasp mathematical thinking as something that preexisted any symbolic representation. Logic and reason, for the intuitionists, were creative and intuitive processes that could never be formalized. Influenced by thinkers such as Henri Bergson and other proponents of *Lebensphilosophie*, the intuitionists wanted to recuperate the supposedly "abstract" rationality critiqued by the Bergsonians by showing it to be itself a kind of vital, embodied phenomenon. Intuitionists believed that mathematical thinking was fundamentally inexhaustible, because it could not be contained by any formal logical rules, which were essentially incomplete because they captured experiences that necessarily came *before* the elaboration of that language.[33]

The intuitionist critique of both formalist mathematics (the reduction of mathematics to its symbolic representations) and logicism (the effort to reduce mathematics to more fundamental logical principles) was not a purely negative critique. For the intuitionists were aiming to reconstruct mathematics on a new basis—or to put it more precisely, they did not seek a new foundation for mathematics but instead sought a new understanding of practice, one that was admittedly constructive, legitimated not by atemporal, a priori logical principles but *self-legitimated* as a productive capacity of the living, embodied mind.

In this context, Gödel's irrefutable critique of all formal systems simply proved

what the intuitionists already believed: the necessity of what might be called "extra-symbolic" intuitions for any mathematical (or logical) activity. This is what Gödel meant when he said that there were *true* propositions that could not be proven—these were true *intuitively* in some way, and not just in some other logical context, because *any* system in which a truth was defined axiomatically was going to find itself subject to the incompleteness theorems.

What is worth noting here is that in this kind of thinking, it was believed that these decisions concerning truth values could be generated *despite* the inadequacies of formal reasoning and formal representational languages. For Gödel, all languages were inadequate to thought, but the incompleteness theorems were hardly occasions for nihilistic despair on his part because thought was something other than its formal articulation. Brouwer advocated much the same thing. So the effort to "deformalize" logic at this time was not so much a simple critical dismantling as a recognition that logic was always a constructive enterprise. Its effectiveness was not therefore threatened by its lack of self-sufficient grounding. Just the opposite. The fundamental incompleteness of all logics only highlighted the flexibility and adaptability of a human mind that would never be wholly confined to these logics. This other dimension of thought—the "reason" that preceded the more abstract and superficially rigorous technical rationality—was of course the focus of much investigation in this period. Husserl himself, for example, was attempting to probe phenomenologically these primordial logical intuitions, and intuitionist mathematicians like Weyl took a serious interest in this kind of work, as did Gödel.[34] Admittedly, the way in which these "intuitions" were conceived, in mathematical work and in phenomenology, verged on the mystical. However, numerous other efforts to understand the "nonlogical" dimensions of rational thought defined the intellectual life of this period, from Ludwig Wittgenstein's highly technical philosophical work to anthropological investigations of non-Western, nonscientific forms of human thought. The important point is that it was understood by many that the decisive acts that moved thinking forward were in a way strangely foreign to the established and formalized systems of thought that came before them—the decision was, in a sense, "heterogeneous" to the given field of truth; it was, in essence, more a disruption than a product of that field.

Looked at from this perspective, we can see that these kinds of conceptual approaches were not confined to the field of mathematical logic, or even philosophy, in the interwar period. There were, as we will see, analogous efforts in diverse disciplines to probe the breakdown of logical, normative, determinate systems in crisis situations. Critically, many thinkers were interested in how this breakdown opened up possibilities for generating new decisions that would reestablish new orders. Often, this productive capacity was understood to lie outside explicit rationality—just like the intuitions of mathematical practice.

So instead of tracing in more detail the specific logical and mathematical con-

text of undecidability, I will open up this concept, tracking it within a broader cultural matrix of ideas, for it is this more meandering path that will lead us, I believe, to a better understanding of how deconstruction and its "politicization" might be integrated into a history of twentieth-century thought.

Crisis Biology:
Organismic Decisions

My first example of this kind of thinking focused on nonmechanical and nonformal modes of decision is what I will call the "crisis biology" of Kurt Goldstein, the German psychiatric researcher whose synthetic work on holistic organisms was greatly influenced by Gestalt psychology.[35] Working with brain-damaged patients during and after the Great War (many of whom were victims of gunshot wounds to the head), Goldstein and his collaborator, the psychologist Adhémar Gelb, investigated the holistic structures of brain processes. In other words, resisting "atomistic" psychological and physiological models, Goldstein and Gelb showed how the mind was in essence a synthesizing entity, constantly creating "Gestalts," organized holistic experiences that is, from the multiplicity of activity taking place in the organism. Influenced by his cousin Ernst Cassirer and more generally by the many other neo-Kantian thinkers of the interwar era, Goldstein would develop his holistic approach with respect to language functions and higher-level cognition. What was so interesting for Goldstein was the ability of organized entities to produce radically new responses to situations and even, when necessary, to reorganize themselves radically in moments of intense crisis. This process could not, Goldstein argued in his analyses of an array of biological functions and structures, ever be explained as the predictable result of discrete, atomized events—reflexes, mechanical responses, or rule-governed behaviors—since these behaviors, as he repeatedly showed, were unprecedented in nature.

Drawing on his extensive clinical work, Goldstein published his master work on the nature of the "organism" in 1934, shortly after he was forced to leave Germany (following a narrow escape from prison, thanks to an intervention by a Nazi official who was a former patient). In this wide-ranging work, Goldstein described a number of examples of what he called sudden "restructurings" that took place in biological organisms during moments of crisis or injury. Interestingly, Goldstein described the organism as in essence a problem-solving entity, noting that "normal as well as abnormal reactions are only expressions of the organism's attempt to deal with certain demands of the environment. Symptoms are *answers, given by the modified organism, to definite demands*."[36] The organism, like the mind, dealt with these demands through a flexible process of restructuring that not only adapted the organism to new external conditions but also, at times, transformed the very internal operations of that entity—its "formal" organization. This was perhaps the most important

idea Goldstein introduced. Suddenly, and without any training—this is what Goldstein constantly remarks—injured organisms could recover the performance of vital functions by *alternative* means not at all predetermined by bodily mechanisms understood statically. Frogs, for example, when one limb is amputated, will immediately substitute another to perform the wiping reflex, and some insects with missing legs will radically (but automatically) reconfigure their gait to maintain stable locomotion.[37]

The point of the these and other examples was to show that the organism was not a machine of isolated parts moving according to definite, predictable rules or normative operation. The organism, confronted with new obstacles to its normal operation, would find the "shortest routes [*Wege*]," as he phrased it, to continue its work, by *transposing* functions if necessary, but not according to any predetermined logic. Moreover, this was *not carried out* by any centralized decision-making entity with its own predictable processes. The unity and order of the organism, he said, was "not confined to a definite anatomical structure, but represents a . . . Gestalt which can utilize, for its course, any available structure."[38] Drawing on the Gestalt psychology developed by figures such as Max Wertheimer, Goldstein explained how dynamic systems tended to seek "closure," that is, stability in some form of equilibrium—though this equilibrium was only determined in relation to specific contextual factors.[39] This meant that the foundational principle of the organism's unity was never specified in advance, and thus it could not be formalized in any way. Biological entities were governed only by the most general tendency to "be ordered." Wholly new "norms" of existence were therefore possible for organisms, Goldstein claimed. A revolutionary turn could take place when, for example, an organism in crisis became "diseased" and had to establish a new norm of health to overcome the crisis. Disease, he wrote, was "shock and danger for the organism." The state of "being well" was marked by the ability to maintain order, despite the "impossibility of certain performances" formerly possible. As Goldstein would emphasize again and again, the new norm was not always identical to previous norms. What looked from one perspective like an aberration or even pathological symptom, then, could within another order of organization serve as a crucial element of its overall harmony—his example was a change in constants such as blood pressure, sugar content of blood, and so on. "These new constants," Goldstein remarks, "guarantee the new order."[40] Critically, the origins of this decisive reordering in crisis were found *not* within the previous order but in that ephemeral realm of a higher "unity" that can intervene in the concrete moment to found a wholly new organization with its own principles of order.

Georges Canguilhem, in his influential dissertation on the normal and the pathological, written during the war and published in 1943, took up Goldstein's insights, fashioning a new theory of disease.[41] Canguilhem characterized disease as a product of the body's own creative potentiality and not as a conflict between an established organism and some external foreign agent. Disease, for Canguilhem,

is in fact what revealed this potential most clearly—the norms of healthy existence were not norms at all, in the legislative sense, but only temporary conditions of order that would be violated by creative somatic activity, if this was necessary to overcome emergency crisis situations. Crucial to Canguilhem's theory was the idea that disease was not "abnormal," a fall of some kind from the purity of a strictly definable health, but instead another (perhaps even privileged) manifestation of the body's essentially dynamic ability to *establish its own norms* of order in varying conditions of life. "The living human being, in a more or less lucid way, extends a spontaneous effort, peculiar to life, to struggle against that which obstructs its preservation and development, taken as norms" (126). The point is that there is no "foundational norm" or highest rule to determine these spontaneous efforts—for the emergency crisis is completely unpredictable. As Goldstein argued, the new order may require radical internal restructuring. These "new constants" need not be considered abnormal or pathological, symptoms to be altered in some way, says Canguilhem, for as Goldstein showed, this new condition was only a new set of norms that guaranteed what was a wholly new order of being (194–95). In the end, Canguilhem saw health not as a stable system of norms to which the body returns after fighting off some alien "disease," but instead as a *creator of values*, the "estab-lisher of vital norms" (126). The organ of decision was not something external to the organism, but a response of the organism itself. The individual is judge: "because it is he who suffers from it from the very moment he feels inferior to the tasks which the new situation imposes on him" (182). The foundation of new norms was a genu-ine event, for this decision in crisis did not flow mechanically from determinate relationships governing the organism. This is how it could face new dangers with creative flexibility.

Writing at a time of intense political crisis and violence, Canguilhem (like Ca-vaillès a participant in the French resistance movement) was quite explicit about drawing political parallels to these biological conceptions. He showed, for example, that Auguste Comte's own traditional theory of disease as an external disruption of the organism could be interpreted as a way of defending the idea that society too had a "normal" functioning (ascertained by social science) that simply had to be protected from "pathological" aberrations in order to function properly. Here, Canguilhem noted, "Comte is justified in stating that the cure for political crises consists in bringing societies back to their essential and permanent structure, and tolerating progress only within the limits of variation of the natural order defined by social statics" (64). Of course, once that particular idea of disease was overturned and replaced by new models in the nineteenth century, as Canguilhem shows in his long analyses of Claude Bernard and other figures, this concept of social pathol-ogy and political intervention became completely obsolete.

And so we cannot help but ask the question: what political analogue is sug-gested by Canguilhem and Goldstein's more dynamic, norm-producing biological entity? It would seem that a *social* organism of this type would not be defined by

some rigid foundational norm, a guideline for political intervention. Canguilhem's structure implies that a social organism would be one that finds itself in a particular environment, with certain processes and abilities at its disposal, and that uses these capabilities to preserve itself in varying and sometimes hostile conditions. As Canguilhem would write:

In biology the normal is not so much the old as the new form, if it finds conditions of existence in which it will appear normative, that is, displacing all withered, obsolete and perhaps soon to be extinct forms. (144)

Politically, then, the social body in crisis would have to be capable of establishing new norms and ridding itself of "withered, obsolete" forms of existence if necessary in the moment. "To be cured," Canguilhem says, "is to be given new norms of life, sometimes superior to the old ones" (228). The question, biologically and politically, was how these new norms would be generated in crisis. How would these interventions be recognized as the path to a new normality?

The Political Theology of Crisis: Decision, Order, Law

As we know, this kind of thinking was hardly foreign to the interwar political situation, where the problem of legitimating institutions and legal regimes in the midst of radical fragmentation and in the absence of any foundational consensus was particularly acute. The crisis was well articulated in Max Weber's famous talk "Science as a Vocation," delivered in 1919.[42] There he dwelled on all the foundational paradoxes of modernity—in medicine, law, politics, history, in all modern practices, we are guided by often rigorous norms and rules, yet these norms and rules cannot themselves be justified normatively or legally (143–45). The difficulty was that in an age of "disenchantment" we could not rely on any mythical foundational grounds for these legitimating norms. So in moments when these practices found themselves in crisis, they are faced with what we can understand as "undecidables"—questions that cannot be answered by the rules of the game, since it is the set of rules itself that is in question.[43] Giving the example of law, Weber wrote:

Juridical thought holds when certain legal rules and certain methods of interpretations are recognized as binding. Whether there should be law and whether one should establish just these rules—such questions jurisprudence does not answer. (144)

And so in moments of intense constitutional crisis, or moments of outright revolution (defining features of the Weimar Republic, that is) legal and political order had to be founded from the outside, however this "outside" force was understood. As Weber famously noted, the legitimacy of such political "reorderings" in the modern era will likely flow from the charisma of the leader, the one who will be considered

to embody, in a way, the ephemeral "unity" of the people. "Men do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but because they believe in him," Weber prophetically declared.[44]

It was of course Carl Schmitt, an astute student of Weber's work, who developed a political and legal theory of decision that took as its point of departure this foundational crisis. Trained before the Great War and influenced by his experiences in that period of violence and political reorganization, Schmitt wrote extensively on the questions of decision, norm, and political unity in the interwar period.[45] Contrary to the usual formulations of his theory, Schmitt was not a simple "decisionist" who thought that some arbitrary Hobbesian sovereign would (and should) simply make decisions when exceptions threatened the existing normative order. In *Political Theology* (1922), where he outlined his famous position on sovereignty ("Sovereign is he who decides on the exception"), his first goal was in a sense "deconstructive."[46] He wanted to show, that is, how liberal constitutional regimes paradoxically *deny* sovereign authority within a system of governing norms, even though in moments of exception, that system will necessarily *require* a sovereign power to restore order and maintain the law, since the old norms will fail to guide decisions in this radically new situation. Schmitt's point here was that the normative structure of law is a specific, concrete construction that maintains a particular sociopolitical "order" that in a sense *precedes* its own explicit formalization.

However, and this was very important to Schmitt's argument, this foundational order itself has a juridical quality, derived not from any specific legal norms, but instead from its orderly structure in general. The normative legal order that emerges to articulate this prior order is not, therefore, some abstract reality, or an a priori logical truth, as some jurists were arguing at this moment (most notably Hans Kelsen).[47] For Schmitt, the actual functioning law was only a concrete mechanism for articulating and defending a social order that has already been established in a particular context. This is why all law is, Schmitt noted, "situational" (13). The exception, for Schmitt, is like a miracle, in that it disrupts the regular course of life, reminding us that life is never going to be mastered by human normative *constructions* (15). Norms cannot establish themselves, Schmitt pointed out, and this meant that to be legitimate the foundational act itself must be understood as having some juridical character. This foundational moment was not itself normatively defined—the decision imposed an order discontinuous with previous organizations. But as the representative of authentic order, sovereign decision derived its legitimacy from the very spirit of order that animated all of the particular legal orders, however defined.

Schmitt was posing a real question: given the inability of any formal legal order to anticipate those situations that would be literally undecidable within that order, how would order be preserved? Who would have the authority to decide "outside" of the law itself? The sovereign—he who decides on the exception—was not, I would say, a person so much as a *concept* for Schmitt. The sovereign was a "liminal"

figure, at once both inside and outside of the legal order. I think he put it this way precisely because he wanted to see the sovereign as in a sense "produced" from within the law as a whole, legitimated by the legal order as "order," and not by the *specificity* of the formal legal prescriptions and, even more important, not legitimated by some *external* authority, the Rousseauist "people" say, or worse, a Weberian "leader" that would speak in its name. Like the organism that produces new norms *from within* in the crisis decision, a Schmittian political entity refounds normative order in times of crisis by generating *from within* new norms appropriate to the new situation. The problem was how to recognize the difference between genuine foundations and refoundations and those that were mere disruptions of the given order. This was, in essence, the existential problem of the political, as Schmitt detailed it in his late Weimar text *The Concept of the Political*, where the political was reduced to its essence as the ultimate final decision between friend and enemy.

In Schmitt's conceptualization—consistent with the interwar culture of disenchantment—any metaphysical or "transcendental" interpretation of this sovereign decision would be resolutely rejected as dangerous and uncontrollable. One goal of *Political Theology* was to map the relations between metaphysical assumptions—theologies, in Schmitt's terminology—and political structures. As Schmitt explained in the title chapter, it seems we must reject immanent, transcendent, and pantheist understandings of sovereignty (50). In other words, the sovereign decisions that protected order in times of crisis cannot be understood as if they were literal "incarnations" of some kind of higher truth *exterior* to the actual political community that was facing the exceptional crisis. Schmitt's sovereign decision, it turns out, is analogous to what the mathematicians called "intuition" and what Canguilhem referred to as a kind of organismic vitality—a wholly *internal* insight, produced from within an embodied, situated entity facing a particular crisis of reason. But in his own text, he left open the question of what kind of theology was analogous to a political account of sovereignty that emphasized the *absence* of any such divine presence in the current world.

But the obvious theological counterpart to Schmitt's conceptualization of the political would be Karl Barth's vastly influential elaboration of "crisis theology," introduced dramatically in his *Epistle to the Romans*, an intense reading of the Pauline letter first published in 1919 and significantly revised in 1921.[48] Shaken by the catastrophic violence and disorder of the Great War, Barth abandoned his earlier liberal theological tendencies and developed an existential account of human faith that emphasized a total separation from God. In his dense and complex text Barth traced the implications of this radical separation for our life in this world. The divine was, for Barth, utterly unknowable in itself, understood only negatively through revelation as something other to human experience. Yet this absence, strangely enough, constituted a very noticeable reminder, Barth said, that the world we inhabit is not exactly what it is. For this reason, the actual content of human

activity, even the very content of religion, Barth explained, is not really the important issue. Rather, the religious activity must again be understood as a *negative* sign—"these temporal things deliver their message precisely as they withdraw and decrease and die in the presence of that eternity in which every finite thing is comprehended" (131). The implication here is that the finite is never its own foundation; human order is never merely the product of human action, yet paradoxically, it is also the case that the infinite that comprehends everything is radically *unknown* for us. This was the crisis Barth was articulating: the need for a decision of faith in this world where any positive signs of divine presence were lacking.

Barth would hint at the political implications of this predicament. He wrote that "whenever men are aware of divine appointment and of being entrusted with a divine mission, sin veritably abounds" (136). According to Barth, legitimacy could not flow from either divine appointment *or* human forms of order, since human life itself was radically incomplete due to the absence of divine presence. Legitimacy, Barth would imply, had to be derived from the very *absence* of both exterior, transcendent legitimations and autonomous regulative principles in this temporal world. Legitimacy is in fact marked by the preservation of crisis, for Barth. The institution of the church, for example, is a form of "visibility which forces invisibility upon our notice" (337). As Barth explained, both "revolutionaries" and "conservatives" alike depend on illegitimate claims to a knowledge of some positive legitimating principle. He cautions us to work to *maintain* in effect the undecidability of the crisis. "Is there anywhere legality which is not fundamentally illegal?" Barth asks (479). Crisis occurs when the demands of history shake our institutions and our sense of reality, but we cannot pretend to know the right solution in advance. The decision is radically existential in this crisis, for Barth, because we can never know the genuine source of all order, the divine order that is. But the decision, in that moment of utter undecidability, must be made *for order*, according to Barth, in order to be a genuine decision, for there we see the reflection of order, or more precisely, the order so defended "bears involuntary witness to THE Order and is the reflection of it" (485).

Like Barth, Schmitt was extremely suspicious of claims for legitimation, moving in his own work to the idea that order needed to be defended not so much because of the intrinsic legitimacy of its legal or political organization, but because any real order was a concrete contribution of order in this temporal world. As he wrote in an essay from 1930, "It is true that each of the many political entities are, in the whole of the world and humanity, merely a *bit of order*, merely a fragment. Yet it is the bit accessible to human action and community."[49] In much of Schmitt's work, therefore, we can see how skeptical he was of the *reliability* of these "spontaneous" efforts to establish new norms (or at least, the reliability of efforts to recognize these moments of refoundation). His own political theory hinged on the creation of what could be called artificial centers of decision and insight—political institutions modeled on entities such as the Catholic Church—that would provide a more stable

substitute for ephemeral inspiration. Institutions were spaces of community order, inspired not so much by the presence of some foundational power, but rather by the common belief in unity that bound the concrete community together in that particular space and time. Schmitt was not, then, a simple authoritarian. Because he took seriously the undecidability of any crisis moment, the fact that in crisis the normative political and legal order could collapse entirely in a revolutionary movement, he sought to protect political communities from dissolution and civil strife. Institutions were, in a sense, instrumental, always subject to the will of the community as a whole. They were spaces for the protection of order, because without institutions, communities had no formal locus of appearance.[50] Still, because any institution did not unproblematically reflect or represent or incarnate some preexisting reality, they were not presumed to have some kind of sacred foundational status—which meant that their legal and formal organization was always open to radical change. Again, the decision, for Schmitt, was a form of prediction—where would order be best protected? From his work on dictatorship on, Schmitt constantly emphasized that radical change was always a genuine risk and provided no guarantees precisely because there *were* no foundational or transcendental realities to rely upon in these open-ended moments. The political "organism" could only rely on itself to provide insight, and who would know what organ would appear to consolidate a new form of order, or whether the organism would succumb to internal conflict or die in an existential battle with other hostile political bodies?

The question—not just for Schmitt, but for many communities facing the crisis of political and legal authority in interwar Europe—was this: Were present institutions vital enough to preserve order or were they no longer viable, were they "withered" and "obsolete," to borrow Canguilhem's words, and therefore hindering the security of the nation?[51] This was the important point, because the system of institutions and the norms governing them could *never demonstrate their own necessity* (though it was possible to demonstrate the incoherence of institutions—this was the form of argumentation used by Schmitt, for example, to critique parliamentarism).[52] The protection, or the abandonment, of institutions and regulations were always genuine decisions, repeated at every crisis. How was this decision derived? Ultimately, a political organ produced a decision and a new order, one that revealed the essence of its organization. The decision was not defined in advance. As Schmitt showed, the decision was proleptically structured. It was a decision for an order to come into existence, one that was not *logically* derived from any prior order. The everpresent possibility of civil war, and the constant threat of external attack, is in effect that structure of undecidability that haunts every political crisis and every genuine political decision. Schmitt's own drastic decision for the new "order" instituted by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, a decision that would, in the end, be a decision for the most horrendous collapse of political and moral order the world had seen, only illustrates with extreme clarity what the interwar theory of crisis always warned against—in the breakdown of formal order, decisions were never guaranteed.

Deconstruction and Postwar Thought

It is now a very short leap from here to Derrida's political writings, where undecidability again takes center stage—and with specific references to Schmitt's ideas on decision. We are now in a position to ask in a preliminary way how the historicization of a concept like undecidability can help us to evaluate deconstruction and, in particular, the turn to the political in Derrida's work.

First, it is important to draw attention to the curious fact that Derrida barely engaged with the interwar discourse that prefigured his own intellectual trajectory, from mathematical undecidability, through the philosophical problem of aporia, to questions of political decision and the nature of law, not to mention the role of religion and theology in these problems. This is not to say that Derrida should have been more explicit about his sources, or that Derrida's work is somehow less original that we might have assumed. My claim is stronger than that. Derrida's turn to the political depended on his ignorance (or at least evasion) of the broader context of ideas central to his early work in deconstruction. Those that have taken up Derrida's work, on political undecidability most notably, but also I would say on related issues in classic deconstruction, have often repeated this same blindness, singling out his insights as if they can be evaluated in total isolation from what was actually going on in twentieth-century thought.

Failing to recognize or at least to take seriously the historical complexity of concepts such as undecidability did, I think, blind Derrida in an important way— he failed, that is, to engage with the many postwar developments that *emerged* from crisis thinking between the wars, developments that *should* have been extremely relevant for his grander philosophical project. By continually recycling a classic set of philosophical texts and issues (very much in the spirit of French philosophical teaching), Derrida refused to engage directly the many streams of thought that were confronting in a rigorous fashion the very problems he repeatedly diagnosed as central to "Western thought."[53] Without taking into account these diverse forms of thought it is clear that it is much too early to think about Derrida's achievements in many of these fields of inquiry.

Second, this historical sketch suggests that there is much work to do if we want to locate the proper contexts for the evaluation of deconstruction in the postwar world. Derrida would of course have found much to "deconstruct" in the way of presence in these interwar theories, but it must be acknowledged that what was emerging then was only the *start* of several important movements of thought, movements that spawned considerable activity in the postwar years in various disciplinary—and interdisciplinary—frameworks. The complexity and diversity of these developments is all too often completely ignored in the rather narrow and sterile debates over the distinctions between "Continental" and "Anglo-American" philosophy. With more historical distance, we can see that even in postwar French thought, important and influential figures (Michel Serres and Georges Canguilhem

are two obvious examples that come to mind) were working on topics that linked them more closely to the concerns of analytic philosophy, marking them as outsiders to Continental thought, given the usual definitions at least, and yet we can hardly understand them without taking into consideration their deep roots in interwar French academic life.[54]

My final suggestion is that it would be useful to map out the diverse ways people in multiple disciplines were interrogating this central problem we have been tracing, that of understanding how unprecedented decisions were possible and what they entailed for our conceptualizations of organization and its transformations. I can only offer a few examples here, in the spirit of exploration. In biology the work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela on the idea of autopoeisis took up some of the key ideas developed by figures such as Goldstein and Canguilhem, as the two authors attempted to understand the way bounded organisms generate unprecedented self-organizations in response to their environments.[55] Varela would himself go on to explore the intersections of Western and Eastern philosophy in this context, tying these ideas to contemporary work in cognitive science.[56] In postwar work on the nature of natural and artificial "automata" (that is, self-governing entities), figures such as John von Neumann and Walter McCulloch, with their important links to cybernetic research, mathematics, and multiple scientific disciplines, recognized the critical need to develop a wholly new form of logic to deal with the nonbinary character of embodied thought and action.[57] Even Schmitt, in his own postwar thinking on international law, would move away from explicitly "decisionist" paradigms as he explored the nonsovereign legal orders of a globalized human space of activity, emphasizing the complex, dynamic, and noncentralized modes of stabilization.[58] Building on cybernetic and biological conceptions, Niklas Luhmann developed a systems theory approach to social and political organization, one that links, in interesting ways, themes from autopoiesis and deconstruction.[59] In different ways, decisions—made in crisis, in moments of true undecidability—were studied as something produced internally, within concretely bounded entities, whether they were minds, bodies, or even communities. When the normative and prescriptive foundations of activity failed to offer guides for actions, still, these entities were seen to be capable of recentering and reorganization.

My point is that we do not have to pretend that these figures had all the answers, or that Derrida and deconstruction should somehow be measured (for better or worse) against these efforts. Yet we need to confront the fact that Derrida in effect based his career on a critique of a concept of reason that was, at least in certain advanced circles of thought, already philosophically dead by the 1930s. In other philosophical settings and, maybe more important, in disciplines outside of traditional philosophy, researchers were focusing on exactly the kind of questions about order that Derrida himself addressed in his own analyses of textuality.

To conclude, then, we can only measure the significance of deconstruction, or any other movement of thought for that matter, by seeing it as history, and not some

disembodied, ahistorical "theory." And only a much more thorough historicization of the postwar world will allow us to see exactly what kind of contribution, if any, deconstruction has made to the formation of our emerging twenty-first-century worldview.

Notes

1. Quoted in Hao Wang, *A Logical Journey: From Gödel to Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 4.
2. Two recent collections reveal the pitfalls and obstacles. *After Poststructuralism: Writing the Intellectual History of Theory*, ed. Tilottama Rajan and Michael J. O'Driscoll (Toronto, 2002), never gets past preliminary theoretical questions. Better, though still much too tentative, is *Historicizing Theory*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Albany, N.Y., 2004). While they are not historical in method, Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2001), and Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge, 1980), are useful introductions to the key issues.
3. See, for example, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, 2003). One of Derrida's last published essays, which touches on terrorism, Eurocentrism, and other themes, was "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, Sovereignty)," *Research in Phenomenology* 33 (2003): 9–52.
4. Overviews appear in Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton, 2004); and Mark Lilla, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida," *New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1998.
5. Two collections of essays address the perennial question of Enlightenment and its relationship to postmodernist critiques: *What's Left of Enlightenment?* ed. Keith Baker and Peter Reill (Stanford, 2001) and *The Enlightenment and Postmodernism*, ed. Daniel Gordon (London, 2001).
6. An example is Wolin, *Seduction of Unreason*, 239.
7. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C., 1992).
8. We can see this being played out in the recent controversy over the unflattering and rather unintelligent *New York Times* obituary of Derrida. See Judith Butler's letter to the *Times* (Oct. 13, 2004) and many other letters and documents, all listed on the University of California, Irvine website, "Remembering Jacques Derrida," http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering_jd/index.php.
9. This work of historicization is now getting underway. A good start is the recent collection of essays, *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*, ed. Julian Bourg (Lanham, Md., 2004). My thanks to Knox Peden for alerting me to this book.

10. Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981).

11. An exception is Paul de Man's later essay "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion," in Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzeg Warminski (Minneapolis, 1996), 69.

12. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Conn., 1979), 10, 12.

13. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc. ABC . . .* (Baltimore, 1977), 148. Further reference in the text.

14. This is not to say anything about Derrida's personal political engagement, or the political dimension of certain pedagogical activities (e.g., his clandestine seminars in Czechoslovakia).

15. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law," trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cardozo Law Review* 921 (1989–90). Further references in the text are to this, the original bilingual edition of the essay.

16. See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London, 1997), 306.

17. Wolin, *Seduction of Unreason*, 241.

18. Noah Horwitz, "Derrida and the Aporia of the Political, or the Theologico-Politico Dimension of Deconstruction," *Research in Phenomenology* 32 (2002): 174–75.

19. Even Wolin, who purports to take a historical view, is so committed to proving Derrida to be dangerously "wrong" that he fails to explore more seriously the concrete historical connections between interwar thought and deconstruction.

20. The foundational texts are collected and translated in Martin Davis, ed., *The Undecidable: Basic Papers on Undecidable Propositions, Unsolvable Problems, and Computable Functions* (New York, 1965).

21. Kurt Gödel, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of the Principia Mathematica and Related Systems. I," in ibid. For a detailed examination of Gödel's paper and its revolutionary use of "Gödel numbering," see Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman, *Gödel's Proof*, rev. ed., ed. Douglas Hofstadter (New York, 2001).

22. This should not be surprising. Though all French philosophy students had to be certified in a science in the 1950s, Derrida chose the "soft" sciences of psychology and ethnography, rather than mathematics or the natural sciences. See Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, 1993), 329.

23. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 118.

24. Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. (Stony Brook, N.Y., 1998), 53, 58.

25. On Jean Cavaillès in the context of French educational institutions, see Jean-François Sirinelli, *Génération intellectuelle: Khâgneux et normaliens dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, 1988), as well as François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, vol. 1, *Le champ du signe, 1945–1966* (Paris, 1991), 112–13.

26. Cavaillès, in *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, explains Gödel's theorem as proving "every theory containing the arithmetic of whole numbers—that is to say pretty much every mathematical theory—is necessarily incomplete; one can state a proposition in that theory which is neither the consequence of the axioms, nor in contradiction with them: *tertium datur*." Nothing Derrida said goes much further than this, and it seems he got the excluded middle reference from Cavaillès. Though Derrida cites this book often in his introduction to Husserl's text, he fails to note this key reference. See Jean Cavaillès, *Oeuvres complètes de philosophie des sciences* (Paris, 1994), 71–72.

27. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston, Ill., 1970).

28. Michel Foucault, "La vie: l'expérience et la science," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 90 (1985): 3–14. This was a special issue devoted to Georges Canguilhem's work.

29. Bennington and Derrida, *Derrida*, 330.

30. On Henri Poincaré in this context see Vladimir Tasic, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought* (Oxford, 2001). A more extended and technical analysis is I. Grattan-Guinness, *The Search for Mathematical Roots, 1870–1940: Logics, Set Theories, and the Foundations of Mathematics from Cantor Through Russell to Gödel* (Princeton, 2000).

31. On the intuitionist school see the texts and introductions gathered in Paulo Mancosu, ed., *From Brouwer to Hilbert: The Debates on the Foundations of Mathematics in the 20s* (New York, 1998), as well as the historical account in Dennis Hesserling, *Gnomes in the Fog: The Reception of Brouwer's Intuitionism in the 1920s* (Basel, 2000).

32. Hermann Weyl would ultimately reject intuitionism and rethink the importance of phenomenology as a basic philosophical science. The complex relations between intuitionism, formalism, and Husserlian phenomenology are explored in Paulo Mancosu and T. A. Ryckman, "Mathematics and Phenomenology: The Correspondence between O. Becker and H. Weyl," *Philosophia Mathematica* 10 (2002): 130–202.

33. Rudolf Carnap once claimed that Gödel's research on undecidables was inspired by L. E. J. Brouwer's 1929 lecture in Vienna on just these themes. See Hesserling, *Gnomes in the Fog*, 282.

34. Gödel remarked (with some envy) on the importance of Husserl's early "conversion" experience that started him on the path of phenomenology.

35. On Kurt Goldstein and his context, see Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton, 1996), esp. chap. 5.

36. Kurt Goldstein, *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (Boston, 1963), 18.

37. Ibid., 52, 221–22, 229–31.

38. Ibid., 222, 232.

39. This was analogous to Max Wertheimer's law of "*prägnanz*," the tendency to fill gaps and overcome inconsistencies. On Wertheimer and Gestalt psychology, see Mitchell Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890–1967* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

40. Goldstein, *The Organism*, 119, 429–38.

41. Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn Fawcett (New York, 1991).

42. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1946). Further references in the text.

43. On this connection, see William Rasch's introduction to Niklas Luhmann, *Theories of Distinction* (Stanford, 2002).

44. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Essays in Sociology*, 79.

45. See Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London, 2000), esp. chaps. 2–3.

46. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 5. Further references in the text.

47. An overview of the issues (and translations of key primary sources) can be found in *Weimar: A Jurisprudence of Crisis*, ed. Arthur J. Jacobson and Bernhard Schlink (Berkeley, 2000).

48. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (Oxford, 1933). Further references in the text.

49. Carl Schmitt, "Ethic of State and Pluralist State," in *Weimar: Jurisprudence*, 310.

50. See for example Carl Schmitt, *Verfassungslehre* [Constitutional Theory] (Munich, 1928),

Roman Catholicism and Political Form (1923), trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, Conn., 1996); and later, his *Uber die drei Arten des Rechstwissenschaftlichen denkens* [Three Types of Juristic Thinking] (Hamburg, 1934) on the idea of the institution. Schmitt was clearly influenced by the French jurist Maurice Hauriou (1856–1929), whose concept of the institution was elaborated in his essay "La théorie de l'institution et de la fondation (essai de vitalisme social)" (1925), in Maurice Hauriou, *Aux sources du droit: le pouvoir, l'ordre, et la liberté* (Paris, 1933). I have traced some of these connections in "Political Unity and the Spirit of Law: Juridical Concepts of the State in the Late Third Republic," *French Historical Studies* 28 (2005): 69–101.

51. I have explored this in greater detail in "'*Legitimität*' and '*Légalité*': Political Theology and Democratic Thought in an Age of World War," in *Religion und Nation / Nation und Religion*, ed. Michael Geyer and Hartmut Lehmann (Göttingen, 2004).

52. See Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), esp. chaps. 1–2.

53. This was, in part, John Searle's and other analytic philosophers' major objection to Derrida's work—that he did not know enough about the philosophy of language to participate in the debates.

54. See Alan D. Schrift's persuasive take on this, in "Is There Such a Thing as French 'Philosophy'? Or Why do We Read the French so Badly?" in *After the Deluge*, esp. 37–39.

55. Humberto Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht, 1980).

56. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991)

57. See, for example, John von Neumann, *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata*, ed. Arthur W. Burks (Urbana, Ill., 1966), and the essays collected in Warren S. McCulloch, *Embodiments of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965). For a historical perspective, see Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mechanization of the Mind: On the Origins of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, 2000).

58. Carl Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the "Jus Publicum Europaeum"* (1950), trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York, 2003).

59. In particular, see Niklas Luhmann, "Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing," in *Theories of Distinction*, 94–112.